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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000188

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: TWO SHIA MINISTERS DISCUSS SLEIMAN'S
"LOST OPPORTUNITY"

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Shia Ministers of Administrative Reform Ibrahim Shamseddine (independent) and Health Mohammad Khalifeh (Nabih Berri's Amal) were mildly critical of President Sleiman during separate meetings February 11 and 12. Both claimed Sleiman had "lost an opportunity" to set a clear vision for the government and to strengthen the office of the presidency. Shamseddine and Khalifeh each highlighted pragmatic reforms necessary for the government ministries to function properly, but were not optimistic that any substantive change would occur prior to the June 7 parliamentary elections.

¶2. (C) On their own electoral prospects, Shamseddine confirmed his intention to run for an MP seat in Beirut, although it would be an uphill battle. Khalifeh, on the other hand was confident that Amal's candidates would fair well in the south. Post-elections, Shamseddine said he would prefer not to have a national unity government, while Khalifeh argued that a national unity government was the only real possibility to avoid trouble between the various political factions, echoing a message that other opposition politicians have been conveying recently. End summary.

SLEIMAN'S LOST OPPORTUNITY

¶3. (C) Shia Ministers of Administrative Reform Ibrahim Shamseddine (independent) and of Health Mohammad Khalifeh (Amal) both told the Ambassador and Poloff that President Michel Sleiman had "lost an opportunity" after the May 2008 Doha Agreement to strengthen his position and the role of the presidency, in separate meetings February 11 and 12, respectively. Shamseddine, named to the Council of Ministers by March 14 but seen as independent, affirmed his belief that "a strong state" was the most important institution for Lebanon. Yet, he believed the state was severely weakened and was undermined by the political factions who attempted to place demands on Sleiman. Shamseddine said that while he likes Sleiman personally, he criticized Sleiman for allowing his election as a consensus choice for president to interfere with the need to provide a "strict and clear" vision.

14. (C) Khalifeh, a close advisor to Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, argued the following day that Sleiman should have presented his own vision in the first weeks after his election. Sleiman, in his opinion, should play a larger role to guide Lebanon through the "transitional period" after Doha and until the June 7 parliamentary elections, including to push for implementation of reform. After Sleiman's election, he said, Sleiman had a "window of opportunity" with local and regional support behind him. However, it was clear the task was becoming more difficult, he continued.

ACCOUNTABILITY, NOT POLITICS,
NEEDED FOR REFORM

15. (C) Shamseddine and Khalifeh, in their ministerial positions, were also critical of the conduct of the Council of Ministers (the cabinet). Shamseddine said that there were at least four decrees drafted by his ministry that were still awaiting discussion by the cabinet, including a proposal for the establishment of an independent committee of judges to investigate allegations of corruption. However, he was not optimistic that any of these measures -- which he believed were accomplishments for the ministry -- would be discussed because of political opposition. Even if the measures were defeated by a vote, he argued that they should at least be discussed openly and all ministers should make their positions known. Shamseddine told the Ambassador he wished for a government where "rule of law and accountability prevailed." He alleged that the current cabinet was unhealthy and was not optimistic that any significant work

BEIRUT 00000188 002 OF 002

could be accomplished in the last 100 days before the parliamentary elections on June 7.

16. (C) Meanwhile, Khalifeh said the government needed to regain its identity as a "provider" for the people. Now, he said, people view hospitals, schools or other public institutions, as affiliates and extensions of political parties or religious groups, instead of as part of the government. He also complained that stagnation in the government prevented reforms of important institutions, such as providers of public health services, because rather than hire "accountable" people as administrators, public institutions were barred from hiring new employees due to budget constraints.

ELECTORAL PROSPECTS
AND NATIONAL UNITY

17. (C) Shamseddine confirmed to the Ambassador that he intended to run for an MP seat in the Beirut 2 electoral district. He said that he was not seeking an alliance with any other party or individual and preferred to remain independent. (Note: The Beirut 2 electoral district has four MP slots that are to be divided equally between the March 14 and March 8/Aoun blocs as part of a gentleman's agreement struck in Doha. If the agreement holds, majority leader Saad Hariri's March 14 coalition would take the Sunni seat and one Armenian seat, while Hizballah's March 8 alliance would take the Shia seat and the other Armenian slot. This would leave no room for Shamseddine unless he allied with Hizballah, which he has said he will not do. End note.) "Independent," he explained, does not mean unbiased. He repeated a common refrain that he is closer to the ideals of March 14 than March 8, but would not seek to be on the March 14 candidate list. Shamseddine said he felt it was his duty to stand by his principles and to represent the "real voices of the Shia community."

18. (C) Khalifeh said Berri and the Amal candidates were well positioned in the south, although some negotiations continue with March 8 ally Michel Aoun and his Free Patriotic Movement for certain Christian seats, especially in the mixed

Shia-Christian district of Jezzine. Khalifeh confided that Berri would not "give up something for nothing," although that was what he claimed Aoun sought from Berri in their intra-opposition negotiation.

¶9. (C) On the issue of a future national unity government after the parliamentary elections, Shamseddine was adamantly opposed to the idea. He said there was a role for the "opposition" -- whether it was March 8, March 14, or independents -- to play, but should be distinct from the majority. Conversely, Khalifeh described Lebanon as a "group of undeclared federations, behaving as if they were independent states," thus the only possible outcome should be a national unity government to join the groups together. However, he added that the whoever the personalities are, the leaders must be "capable."

COMMENT

¶10. (C) Contacts in the health and pharmaceuticals industries, as well as Khalifeh's own Director General at the Ministry of Health, note that Khalifeh's management of the ministry has been less than transparent. In the tradition of his party leader Nabih Berri, he is rumored to be profiting handsomely from his ministerial appointment. As with many politicians in Lebanon, Khalifeh may be saying the right things, but his motivation for real reform may not equal his rhetoric. Shamseddine's reputation is spotless, but he has not had much success winning approval of government reforms, his portfolio, in the current national unity government. End comment.

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